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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8879

INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 7660

RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 0871

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 0140

RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY 1680

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 5939

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2071

RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 0183

RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 7260

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002855

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM TH

SUBJECT: THAILAND: COLOR ME GREEN - YELLOW-SHIRTS ENTER THE POLITICAL RING AND CHANGE COLORS ALONG THE WAY

REF: A. BANGKOK 2207 (DEMOCRAT PREVAILS)

1B. BANGKOK 1265 (THAI POLITICAL ROUNDUP)

1C. BANGKOK 982 (SONDHI SHOT)

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Classified By: POL Counselor George Kent, reasons 1.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

11. (C) The New Politics party (NPP), led by media tycoon Sondhi Limthongkul, is the newest entry into Thailand's political sweepstakes. Built on the yellow-shirt People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), whose leaders comprise the NPP leadership, the NPP aspires to channel the energy and nationalistic spirit of the "yellow-shirt" movement into an effective formal political machine -- with a new light green color scheme -- capable of advancing its policy objectives. Sondhi's political gambit represents a belief that the established Democrats cannot represent PAD interests within the formal political, parliamentary-based process. Despite lofty rhetoric and ambitious electoral goals, however, most analysts suspect the NPP will have only modest success in the next round of elections, and inflict only minimal damage on the Democrats. Perhaps even more troubling for the NPP's prospects moving forward, the party -- as well as "the yellow shirts" more broadly -- also appears to be riven by internal disagreements about core party orthodoxy, namely whether to promote fealty to the institution of the monarchy, or simply to the current King himself.

12. (C) Any analysis of the electoral map reveals that the NPP has a long, tough slog ahead of it. Realistically, the party would be fortunate to capture 10 seats in the next election. It is not clear how such a small foothold in the Parliament would allow Sondhi and company to fundamentally restructure the Thai political system, one of NPP's stated objectives. Moreover, the ascension to the thrown of the widely-disliked Crown Prince could splinter the PAD and NPP, if prominent members of the party openly question the presumed heir to the throne's fitness to assume the monarchical reins. Either way, Sondhi and company appear to have hedged their bets by keeping the PAD in play while building the NPP as a party.

If, as expected, the NPP underwhelms on election-day and finds the business of winning votes more complicated than the business of occupying airports, Sondhi and crew can always fall back to the streets and cyberspace to make their messages heard. End Summary and Comment.

PAD DECIDES IT'S PARTY TIME

¶3. (C) The New Politics Party (NPP) was founded on June 2, 2009 as the political arm of the PAD. The NPP was established to complement, rather than supplant the PAD; and the party and street movement enjoy a substantial overlap in terms of membership, funding, and objectives. PAD coordinator and NPP Secretary General Suriyasai Katasila told us November 3 that the PAD would "remain focused on countering Thaksin," while the NPP would pursue the movement's goals within the formal, parliamentary-based political process. In a development that surprised no one, party loyalists overwhelmingly elected Sondhi as the party's first party leader during the NPP's inaugural general assembly on October 6. Sondhi, who has almost fully recovered from the spring assassination attempt that nearly killed him earlier this year (REF B) accepted the job, despite the fact that he once famously told his admirers to "slap my face with your shoes if one day I take any political position."

¶4. (SBU) The transition also involved a change in color, from yellow (of the PAD, in honor of King Bhumibol) to light green (of the NPP). The party's symbol contains four yellow interlocking arms (representing unity among the Thai people in all four regions) set against a green backdrop, with the

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green scheme representing the party's commitment to clean governance. The party has also embraced an environmental agenda, which it believes is consistent with its other goal of promoting sustainable development.

PARTY OBJECTIVES

¶5. (C) By and large the PAD supporters who now constitute the NPP party base have traditionally cast their ballots for Democrat candidates. With the NPP now in the political arena, most analysts believe the NPP will be pulling votes away from the Democrats rather than introducing new voters into the political process or attracting votes from other constituencies. According to the party, NPP supporters are largely comprised of -- but not limited to -- educated, relatively affluent people in urban areas. NPP Sec-Gen Suriyasai predicts the NPP is likely to do the best in Bangkok and the Bangkok suburbs, in Pichit (in the lower north), and upper north. The party could also steal a seat here and there through Democrat party defections (Note: MP elections generally turn on personalities and individuals rather than party affiliation. End Note.)

¶6. (C) Publicly at least, the NPP has set very bold objectives for the next round of elections. Privately, Suriyasai stated that the NPP expected to be in opposition regardless of whether the Democrats or Thaksin-backed Puea Thai formed the next government; they would play a checking role on corruption and bad governance from the opposition benches.

¶7. (SBU) In April, for example, PAD leader Chamlong Srimuang told the media "that it would be important for the new party to lead the government in the next coalition, otherwise it will be no different from all the old politics with its vote-buying, mud-slinging and money politics." In May, on the eve of the party founding, PAD leader (and current DP MP) Somkiat predicted to us that their new political force could score 30 seats in the next election. Suriyasai recently offered up a more sober minded analysis, telling us the NPP

hoped to win 20 seats in the next election, a number that most observers feel is still overly optimistic. Based on conversations with contacts from across the party spectrum, most informed Thai political observers believe the party will pick-up anywhere between zero and 10 seats.

DEMOCRATS NOT SHAKING IN THEIR BOOTS

¶18. (C) Current DPM and Democrat Secretary General Suthep told us in August 2008 that he fully expected the PAD movement eventually to morph into an actual party and acknowledged that such a party would siphon votes from the Democrats, while posing as a "nationalist" political force. Outwardly, Democrats do not appear worried now that the NPP has been formed. Democrat MP M.L. Apimongkol Sonakul, who represents a district in Bangkok that is arguably one of the NPP's strongholds (he estimated 15-20,000 PAD supporters in his district), told us recently that he enjoyed a 60,000 vote plurality in the last election; even if the NPP doubled its base, stripping 40,000 votes from him, he could win re-election comfortably.

¶19. (C) In explaining why the NPP would be hard pressed to translate its base of support into parliamentary seats, Apimongkol told us that although the NPP enjoyed some popularity and support, its membership was scattered throughout the country without any one centralized "NPP base." The NPP voters were spread too thin around the country and were only concentrated in a handful of areas where they might have a shot at taking a seat or two away from the Democrats; he predicted the NPP might win 7-8 seats on the party list based on percentages, and no constituency seats outright.

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¶10. (C) Government Whip and Democrat MP Chinnaworn Boonyakiat also told us that the NPP would have little to no impact during the next election. Chinnaworn pointed to the August by-election in the province of Surat Thani as evidence of the party's weakness, noting that the party had urged its supporters to "vote no" on election day by failing to register a preference on their ballots. In the event, despite the hype and build-up, only ten percent of the votes were marked with no preference, and the Democrat candidate steamrolled his way to a comfortable victory.

SOME IN NPP BELIEVE THIS PRINCE SHOULD BE A PAUPER

¶11. (C) For a party that was publicly built at least in part on a foundation of loyalty to the institution of the monarchy, the NPP privately is surprisingly schizophrenic on the succession question. Suriyasai revealed to us that the PAD/NPP was split between those who unreservedly supported the institution, and those who merely supported the King personally. He counted himself in the latter group, indicating a lack of support for the presumed heir to the throne: Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn. This begs the obvious question of what would happen to the party if -- as expected -- the Crown Prince inherited the keys to the Kingdom? Suriyasai told us that he personally believed the monarchy needed to be reformed, and even went so far as to characterize some elements of the royalist movement as "dangerous," perhaps even more so than the red-shirt movement backing Thaksin.

JOHN